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Her only training was from the school of hard knocks in Depression-era New Orleans, she didn't cook, and she viewed herself as "a little sawed-off kid" from a nondescript restaurant in the French Quarter. And yet, Ella Brennan, with the support of a colorful, industrious—and sometimes contentious—Irish family, an insatiable desire for learning, and a hurricane-strength will, rose to become one of America's most celebrated restaurateurs.

This is her remarkable, inspirational story of competing in a male-dominated world, inventing her career as she went along, and making sure that everyone around her had a grand time. Fabulous breakfasts and Bananas Foster at Brennan's Jazz brunch and Haute Creole menus at Commander's Palace—she was present at their birth. The payoff was the loyalty of the guests she entertained, the devotion of the employees she mentored, and the loving embrace of her native city.

Hospitality is Ella's passion, and she taught the restaurant industry how to do it properly, earning a Lifetime Achievement Award from the James Beard Foundation. During a career that began in the 1940s and still reverberates, she was a pioneer of the modern American food movement, fostered the careers of celebrity chefs such as Paul Prudhomme and Emeril Lagasse, befriended a marquee full of Hollywood stars, and became the matriarch of a bountiful family of restaurateurs.

Ella has been the ultimate behind-the-scenes presence and never cared to tell her own story until now. But with the help of her daughter, Ti Adelaide

Miss Ella

== OF ==

COMMANDER'S PALACE

|| "I DON'T WANT A RESTAURANT WHERE A JAZZ BAND CAN'T COME MARCHING THROUGH" ||

ELLA BRENNAN & TI MARTIN



Miss Ella

|| OF ||

COMMANDER'S PALACE

BRENNAN & MARTIN



GIBBS SMITH

"I DON'T EVEN KNOW IF SHE OWNS A PAN, BUT SHE HAS ONE OF THE MOST AMAZING PALATES THAT I'VE EVER RAN INTO—EVER. . . SHE HAS THIS INCREDIBLE GENE ABOUT PEOPLE, SHE'S PRACTICALLY A GENIUS."

—EMERIL LAGASSE, celebrity chef and cookbook author

"THE MEMOIR OF THE DAZZLING AND DELIGHTFUL ELLA BRENNAN IS CANDID AND SAVORY; IT'S THE CHRONICLE OF A LIFE WELL COOKED, WELL SERVED, AND WELL LIVED."

—WALTER ISAACSON, journalist and intellectual leader

"ANYONE INTERESTED IN A BRILLIANTLY SUCCESSFUL HOSPITALITY CAREER NEEDS TO READ THIS BOOK. FOR THOSE WHO AREN'T, MISS ELLA IS A LIFE PRIMER ON HOW TO HAVE A GREAT LIFE AND HAVE 'A DAMNED GOOD TIME' DOING IT. WHICH IS WHAT YOU WILL HAVE READING THIS BOOK. AFTER I DID, I KNEW WHAT SHE MEANS ON LOOKING BACK BY SAYING 'LUCKY, LUCKY ME.'"

—JEREMIAH TOWER, celebrity chef

"ELLA WAS A CELEBRITY RESTAURATEUR BEFORE THERE WERE CELEBRITY CHEFS. . . SHE'S THE PIZAZZ AMBASSADOR OF NEW ORLEANS."

—JULIA REED

"ELLA BRENNAN . . . I WOULD SAY THERE IS NO MORE IMPORTANT FEMALE RESTAURATEUR EVER."

—TORY MCPHAIL

"MISS ELLA . . . I ADMIRE HER, I WORSHIP HER, I LOVE HER! SHE IS THE QUEEN OF HOSPITALITY & ENTERTAINMENT IN AMERICA! I'M GRATEFUL FOR HERR LIFELONG PARADE OF LOVE, PASSION, LEADERSHIP AND GENEROSITY IN NOLA."

—DANIEL BOULUD, Chef-Owner, The Dinex Group

"HER LIFE'S WORK HAS PERMEATED THE WHOLE LANDSCAPE OF AMERICAN COOKING."

—DREW NIEPORENT

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Martin, Miss Ella reveals what makes her strong, ambitious, creative—and, occasionally, a "blubbering mess." Friends and colleagues—among them Jeremiah Tower, Danny Meyer, Emeril Lagasse, Daniel Boulud, Julia Reed, and Tim and Nina Zagat—also chime in to paint the full portrait of this "pizazz ambassador for New Orleans."

Cue up the jazz, sip on a Sazerac, and allow Miss Ella to reveal the heart of her "wonderful world"—as her beacon Louie Armstrong put it.

ELLA BRENNAN was born in 1925 in New Orleans, Louisiana. From her first job at the age of eighteen working in her brother's bar, she has spent her entire professional life in the restaurant business, with her crowning achievement being the Commander's Palace restaurant. Ella is the recipient of a James Beard Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award. She has two children, Ti Martin and Alex Martin.

TI ADELAIDE MARTIN is the daughter of Ella Brennan and co-proprietor of Commander's Palace.

Jacket design by Michel Vrana

Front cover photo by Donn Young



ABOVE, LEFT: Ned Reed, Ella Brennan, Al Hirt (standing), and Paul Martin.
 ABOVE, RIGHT: Ella and Paul Martin. BELOW: Ralph Alexis and Ella standing in the door of *Vieux Carré Restaurant* (photograph by Jack Robinson, The Jack Robinson Archive, LLC; www.robinsonarchive.com).



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"Your Restaurant Stinks!" (1944-1954)

"WELL, GO FIX IT, SMARTY PANTS."

—OWEN BRENNAN

When you walked into the Old Absinthe House on the corner of Bourbon and Bienville, you'd hear ghosts murmuring even before you downed the first Sazerac at the polished wood-topped bar. That was probably true even in its early days during the Jean Lafitte/Andrew Jackson era in the early 1800s, and it became even more true over the years when Mark Twain, P. T. Barnum, Enrico Caruso and Jenny Lind were said to have knocked back a few there. When Owen bought the bar in 1943, he was determined to make it prominent again as a gathering place for New Orleans society—and give those ghosts fresh material to whisper about.

He'd been looking for a business that all of us could be in together and that would allow us to take care of Mom and Dad. They were approaching retirement age, though few people in those days had pensions or any money saved up for their later years. Owen had bought a service station and a drug store up near City Park, and he helped run the Court of Two Sisters restaurant in the French Quarter while the owner was serving in World War II. So he had made a little

money but was looking to make more. Owen also had been doing business with a liquor wholesaler, who loaned him \$15,000 to buy the Old Absinthe House. It was a money machine, but Owen soon took it to another level of sophistication. He reasoned that if you drew a higher-class crowd and charged more for drinks, your income would go up. Very smart move.

One of the first things he did was hire a great black piano player and jazz singer, Walter “Fats” Pichon, and create a stage for him in the back room, which was like a nightclub within the bar. The room was usually crowded but in an intimate way, and I can still hear the clinking ice in the highballs and see the candles flickering on the tables. Fats wore a tuxedo and played in front of a giant mirror with a spotlight on him and would dazzle the patrons with the pop and jazz standards of the day, everything from “Don’t Get Around Much Anymore” to “Night and Day” to “Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries,” which became my favorite. Fats’s showmanship took the crowd to giddy heights and glided back down so as to not interrupt the conversation too much.

Boy, I’d give anything to hear him do his act again, his way with that piano, his joy in it. My musical tastes have always run to the American songbook, the early New Orleans jazz repertoire, and show tunes (especially when sung by Judy Garland, the greatest performer of all time; Ti always touts Barbra Streisand, but she’s dead wrong!). Fats was a virtuoso with nearly any genre.

The place had two stories and a mezzanine level, with an office and a small guest room on the second floor, where Louis Armstrong once stayed to get around the segregation laws that governed hotels. Robert Mitchum stayed there too. Owen had met him when Mitchum was hitchhiking after his stint on a Georgia chain gang—busted for loitering, of all things! In that era, not having a job could lead to such harsh treatment. Owen brought Mitchum home that night for dinner, and they become good friends. He was a love, and we all adopted him.

Daddy would come in sometimes after work at the shipyard and help with the seating—the small tables in back had red-and-white tablecloths and candles, and everybody wanted a good view of Fats. Our clientele was either going to dinner nearby or coming from dinner, or sometimes they’d drop by before *and* after. Everyone dressed up—the women competed for the fanciest cocktail dress, and the men wore coats and ties no matter whether they were going to Galatoire’s,

Antoine’s or Arnaud’s, the dominant old-guard restaurants. It was smashing! Like Rick’s Café Américain in *Casablanca*. Owen knew how to set a stage.

Owen was the host and knew everybody and talked to everybody. If there was something interesting going on, he was probably involved. Some people have referred to him as the “impresario of the French Quarter,” and it was true. One night he stood in the middle of Bourbon Street and said to anyone who would listen, “If you can’t sell New Orleans, you can’t sell anything! This has got to be the best tourist town in America.” He believed it would be the easiest thing in the world to promote the city if we got our act together. (And the city did, eventually, though it took a while for other large, high-end hotels to be built that would give the Roosevelt, with its famous Blue Room and Sazerac Bar, a run for its money.)

Owen just knew what it took to make people happy. It was an instinct. He understood hospitality and he understood service, and he taught them to us all. He was the first Brennan to go into that type of business, and it was a great choice because the bar brought in money steadily and gave him a chance to work his natural charisma—and sleep late. I’ll never forget the day World War II ended. Somebody must have awakened Owen and told him the news, and he immediately said, “Close those big doors on the outside! Close it up until I can get there.” He was so afraid the bar would be mobbed, and people did go crazy on Bourbon Street, as you can imagine, but his goldmine came through unscathed except for the (temporarily) depleted liquor supplies. He owned the place until the day he died.

I don’t remember much about Owen before he got married (I was four), but as a kid I always wanted to be near him. Whenever he and Maude (we called her Maudie) would get ready to go home after eating dinner at our house, I’d want to go with him, and they’d frequently take me. Spending so much time in their company gave me an early window into the exotic (to my eyes) world of adults and shaped my views in ways that I’m still discovering. At the time, I’m certain that I thought, “Well, if this is what grown-ups do, if this is how they live their lives, then let’s get cracking!”

And boy did Owen enjoy life to the fullest. He took flying lessons (until he walked away from a crash, which dampened his enthusiasm), drove a nice Lincoln and wore a Patek Philippe wristwatch. In the summer it was white linen suits; in

the winter, black silk. His style was classic and debonair, and he carried himself well. He wasn't materialistic, but he appreciated fine things and would save his pennies to afford them. As glamorous as our sister Adelaide and he were, I always said they could stretch a dollar further than anyone I knew—they just knew what to spend it on. Most often it was on classic, stylish things and not silly, wasteful stuff. His life was all about balance—he was foremost a night person, so he'd spend the afternoon at home with his family, then come down to the Quarter.

Owen's reputation as a savvy and charismatic entrepreneur reaped enormous benefits for our businesses, and for the city as well. Owen met Maggie Ettinger, a famous Hollywood publicist and the cousin of entertainment columnist Louella Parsons, during one of her trips to New Orleans. She was another one of those wonderful people that just adopted us. Since Owen seemed to know everybody, people would often come to him to see if he could arrange celebrities to attend or speak at their fundraising events, which would prompt Owen to ask Maggie to help him out. One time Maggie sent Hedda Hopper and another time, Gracie Allen. I stayed in touch with Maggie and even managed to see her during a business trip I made to Los Angeles when she was dying of cancer. She was a grand gal.

Sometimes Owen was just playing around—he was a world-class practical joker. The famous ventriloquist Edgar Bergen was often in New Orleans doing his act at the Blue Room in the Roosevelt Hotel, and naturally Owen ended up befriending him. One time, Edgar's wonderful wife, Frances, an actress and model, was going to perform at the Swan Room at the Monteleone Hotel, though Edgar wasn't able to join her. So he called Owen and told him to please take good care of Frances. Owen had her to dinner, where they became instant friends.

Owen had an idea to surprise Frances at her show with some famous "audience members." He'd created something called the Secret Room at the Old Absinthe House, where he had installed these life-sized papier-mâché characters from the history of New Orleans, such as Andrew Jackson and the pirate Jean Lafitte. Owen had concocted all sorts of stories about the general and the pirate having secret meetings to plan the battle of New Orleans and all sorts of nonsense. People would pay a nickel to go up into the Secret Room where there was a wonderful man who played the banjo and told the stories. It was a bit like the wax museums of today.

WHEN SATCHMO CAME TO TOWN

One of my favorite memories is of Louis Armstrong coming back to his hometown in February 1955 to perform on *The Colgate Comedy Hour* TV show, which was being broadcast live from Mardi Gras. The show was originally planned to be staged elsewhere, but somehow Owen got wind of that and finessed the situation. The next thing you know, it's being broadcast on national television right in front of our little business. When youngsters today think some people are just lucky, I think about that incident. You can make your own luck if you're always pushing yourself. A little fancy footwork doesn't hurt.

When Louis's segment was done, he stood in the intersection and played "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans" while we watched from the balcony. It was like he was the Pied Piper. People were coming out of every place and gathering in the street just to be near him. This man, our Louis, kept playing. I don't think there was a dry eye around. We couldn't help it, because we all knew what was going on with segregation at that time. Here was our beloved, homegrown genius who no doubt knew better than anyone what it means to miss New Orleans. I was in awe and weak in the knees with sadness for him and for my fellow citizens. Shame on all of us. Why didn't we fix it sooner? It was so damn wrong. We love you, Louis . . . and we're sorry.

Anyway, on the night of Frances's show, Owen had Andrew Jackson and Jean Lafitte carted over to the front row of the theater, hoping Frances would spot them and fall out laughing. She did, as did everyone else. Frances stayed in touch with me for years, calling whenever she was headed to town. I was always happy to see what a great success their daughter, Candace, became.

By the time Owen asked me to come to work at the Old Absinthe House in late 1943, he had turned it into something special. Our brother John was still in the military and Owen needed someone to do the daytime grunt work, mostly

clerical duties and banking, and to help collect rent for his real estate business. I was mostly confined to the office upstairs, but it was something to do after I had quit secretarial school, and I began to take to it, even though it was a learn-on-the-job situation. It kept me in movie money, I was more or less my own boss, and it gave me entrée to what Mom continued to call the “nasty old French Quarter.” It also didn’t hurt that Owen had bought me my first car, a used blue Ford convertible with whitewall tires. How’s that for a big brother? I look back and wonder how he managed to do things like that. Times were tough. As the oldest of six, he felt the weight of being responsible for all of us as well as his own family, which would grow to include three sons. That sense of love of and duty to family was something that was always there for all of us—unspoken but strong. I adored him.

Owen was enjoying his success, and my job was working out well for me, but he was always looking for more opportunities. At one point his friend “Count” Arnaud of Arnaud’s restaurant laid down a good-natured challenge, saying something along the lines of, “I doubt that a dumb Irishman could ever run a successful restaurant.” Naturally, Owen set out to prove him wrong. He had a hunch that the owner of a nondescript family-dining place across the street from the Old Absinthe House, called the Vieux Carré, might be putting the business up for sale. So one night he gave the owner’s son a ride home and said, “I hear your family is planning to sell the Vieux Carré.” The son was stunned. “How did you know that? We just talked about it last night.”

The truth was, Owen *didn’t* know. He was just fishing, but he ended up reeling in a potentially lucrative business opportunity. Thinking, aiming for a goal, making his own luck . . . again. Owen and Daddy bought the business in 1946, and about six months later they asked me to help manage the place. Owen planned to have Adelaide come on board soon after to handle the business side of things, but he needed somebody to oversee the day-to-day right away.

“You can do it, kid,” said the big brother, though I was saying to myself, “What the *hell* are you thinking?!”

So much for getting comfy!

I was just shy of twenty-one, and once again I was thrust into a situation that I didn’t know the first damn thing about—I’d only worked in Owen’s bar,

never a restaurant—and would have to figure it out for myself. I’d like to think that Owen saw some brains and energy in his little sister, or maybe he just needed someone in a pinch so that he could focus on his bar. I don’t know. What I did know is that the Vieux Carré wasn’t a very good restaurant. In fact, it stank. The place had thirty-one tables and a few more seats at the bar, all on the street level, and four big windows covered with curtains. The interior just looked and felt tired. Even the chandeliers were way too small given the tall ceiling. Just blah.

Our family rarely dined out, and even though I had gotten to know a few people who ran restaurants, I had no experience in that world. Thanks to Mom and Leona, however, I did know great home cooking, and I eventually realized how good theirs was. That was one of my big concerns with Vieux Carré: the menu was boring and skimpy. They had about five entrées—trout meuniere, some kind of chicken, roasted veal or leg of lamb with mint jelly out of the jar, that kind of thing. Awful. No one thought in terms of “regional cuisine” back then, but they did serve gumbo, and shrimp remoulade, which consisted of four teeny-tiny shrimp, maybe the size of my fingernail, that arrived on a bed of shredded lettuce and were dabbed with the remoulade. For dessert there was bread pudding and ice cream. Heck, I had eaten better food every day of my life at home, and here customers were paying good money for this inferior stuff.

I kept bitching and moaning to Owen—“Your restaurant stinks! It just stinks!”—until he’d finally had enough and said, “You think you’re so smart? Well, go fix it, smarty pants.” And so my career as a restaurateur was launched.

I was scared to death and very insecure about being in an environment with grown-up people who seemed to know what they were doing. But we got right to work fixing the operation.

At the beginning we were losing money hand over fist. One day I was in the ladies room getting ready to leave when Owen barged in. Without knocking. I was putting on my lipstick and he was bitching at me about how we had to start making some money. “Don’t you see this statement here?” he said, thrusting some papers at me. “I’m going broke!”

“I don’t know what else to do. How can you make money off of a place like this?” (I never was much good at diplomacy.)

He grabbed the lipstick out of my hand and wrote “40%” on the mirror in fire engine red.

“Owen, that’s my favorite lipstick! What the hell is this?”

“Forget the damn lipstick. You go take the food inventory and work on that menu until the food cost is forty percent. Not a percentage higher.”

We were probably doing fifty percent on food costs, but who knew?

“I hate taking inventory.”

“Well, take it until you get it right or until you’re smart enough to get someone else to take it for you. Otherwise, you’re fired.”

Owen fired me at least three times that I recall, but Mom always made him hire me back. It was like a bad comedy.

We were making customers happy, but we didn’t know how to turn a profit, like some of our nearby competitors did. We’d be getting ready for dinner and I’d walk out our back door and look at the front door of Arnaud’s, where there was a line of people. Then I’d walk out the front and see the line at Galatoire’s up the street. We never had a line out the door, I promise you that.

One day, a guy from Antoine’s came to our kitchen and handed us one of their menus and asked if he could have one of ours. “Well,” I thought, “that’s a classy way to do it.” Nowadays I suppose that might be called price fixing. It wasn’t price fixing then; it was simply the way we worked. You see my prices, I see your prices and we go on from there. I’ll never forget that as long as I live.

Eventually Adelaide joined us and John came home from the service and started buying the supplies. Daddy quit the shipping business and became a mature presence in the front of the house, handling reservations and seating. He was bringing in people he knew from the shipyard to dine, and Owen was sending us customers from his bar across the street, so things slowly picked up. (I’m not sure if I ever got food costs down to 40%, but I was trying.)

At first we were making it up as we went along, everyone falling all over one another. Masters of improvisation, we were. But things began to stabilize and that allowed me to tackle the kitchen, where I had the great good fortune to be taken under the wings of two fine cooks, Paul Blangé and Jack Eames, whom Owen had convinced to stay on when he bought the restaurant.

It’s not much of an exaggeration to say that I lived in that kitchen, which was

dinky by today’s standards and had a cement floor. One of the most exciting times in my life was sitting on a barstool watching Jack and Paul take a haunch of meat and break it down or take a whole fish and use every scrap of it to make something. At that point I didn’t know beef from lamb from pork in the raw stage, and I became fascinated by the whole process. These were serious cooks who yearned to do more and better things with their skills, and they taught me everything. Jack came in early in the morning and did the prep and the ordering, and Paul would arrive early afternoon and take over the cooking.

It was a wonderful education and I was thrilled, especially when it got to the point where I could begin writing the menus. I read everything I could find about food and cooking (and about running a business, too), though the sources were meager and the cookbook boom in this country was still decades away. Photocopiers hadn’t been invented, so you had to bring the book over from the library or wherever you had scrounged it up and sit there taking notes.

I finally got my hands on *The Escoffier Cookbook: A Guide to the Fine Art of Cookery*, the bible for all things French, and right there, in the first 160 or so pages, were the primary sauces of cooking. When I started to understand the basics, the rest of French cooking began to make sense. (I even began to see some similarities to what cooks were doing in New Orleans.) I had been trying to come up with these dishes, but I didn’t know how to get there. Paul and Jack knew enough that they could take what I was trying to do and move with it. They had felt handcuffed and uninspired by the limited menu and were happy to shake things up. I give them all the credit in the world.

To begin with, we did away with French titles on the menu—Coq au Vin, Boeuf Bourguignon or what have you—and translated them into English so our customers could better understand them. Sacrilege! I believe we were the first fine-dining restaurant in New Orleans to do that, strangely enough. Then we added dishes that weren’t on other menus: chicken Pontalba; Paul’s trout with a gumbo-like seafood sauce that was definitely Creole, but unique; stuffed flounder; redfish courtbouillon; pheasant, duck and venison like we had grown up on; soups and stews like Nellie made; and baked oysters on the half shell with different sauces. The menu was still French, but we Americanized it with Creole touches.



ABOVE: Ella and Paul Blangé (right of Ella) in the kitchen of Vieux Carré (photograph by Jack Robinson, The Jack Robinson Archive, LLC; www.robinsonarchive.com). BELOW, LEFT: Ella and Paul Blangé in kitchen of Vieux Carré. BELOW, RIGHT: Ella and Paul Martin with Alex Brennan-Martin.



ABOVE: Ella Brennan float during Mardi Gras parade. BELOW: Brennan family in costume for Mardi Gras.



10

Lighting a Fire: Emeril Lagasse, Jamie Shannon and the Commander's Palace Classroom (1983-2001)



**"SHE IS EXTREMELY DEMANDING, BUT NOT
HARD TO WORK FOR. YOU HAVE TO BE ELLA
BRENNAN TO BE BOTH."**

—EMERIL LAGASSE TO THE *TIMES-PICAYUNE*

We knew Paul was going to leave Commander's sometime in 1982 to join his wife, K, at their K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen restaurant and further develop his career. Though we often had spirited discussions about the Commander's menu, we had a warm relationship and parted on very good terms, with Paul offering to help out until we found a replacement.

But where would we find the next Paul Prudhomme, someone who could take charge of the kitchen and execute the ideas we had for the restaurant? There wasn't anyone on the team we felt we could promote, so we hired one or two chefs from the outside who proved to be OK but still didn't have all of the qualities we were looking for. Eventually we called in a recruiter, and he sent us a couple of people whom we interviewed, but nothing clicked.

Then he sent me the résumé of someone named Emeril Lagasse, a kid from Massachusetts who had gone to Johnson & Wales culinary school in Providence,

Rhode Island, which wasn't that well known at the time. I scanned it and said, "I don't want to hire this boy—he's twenty-three years old!" He was cooking at some place on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and he had cooked at a businessman's hotel in New York, so I decided to reject him right then because I didn't want to bring him down to New Orleans and then reject him.

But this recruiter stayed on my back, and a recommendation came from Larry Forgione of An American Place, whom I respect very much. (Years later I would send Dickie to work for Larry in New York.) So I finally gave in and said, "OK, I'll bring him in, but I'm telling you right now I don't think it's going to work."

In the two months leading up to his visit, Emeril and I began calling each other about once a week, just to chat about his views on cooking and his outlook on life. In high school he had been a musician with a scholarship to the prestigious New England Conservatory of Music, but he had switched to a culinary path, which I found intriguing.

Emeril recalls that I picked his brain relentlessly during those talks: "OK, so tell me what you have been cooking the past week. And why. And what ingredients you've been using. And why." Or, "Tell me your philosophy about getting people excited about food." Then we'd talk about service and wine: "Do you like wine? What wine do you like? How do you study for wine?"

I really, really wanted to know what this young man might bring to the table before we met him.

Finally, Emeril arrived in New Orleans around dusk on a Sunday. The airline had lost his luggage, so he looked a bit discombobulated when he emerged from the cab in front of Commander's. I had just walked some guests outside to say goodbye, and when I spotted him I said, "You must be Emeril Lagasse." He replied, "I *know* you're Ella Brennan."

"Well, come on in."

We sent our maître d', George Rico, to get him some toiletries, and then I invited Emeril into the kitchen and asked him what he thought of all the great aromas wafting about.

"Well, it kind of smells like my mom's kitchen."

What a perfect answer! And completely sincere. That's when I began to suspect we might have someone special.

On Monday Dick and I sat down and visited with Emeril and his wife, Elizabeth. We got somebody to drive them around the city so they could see what it looked like. He came back and we talked some more, and then we asked him to make something in the kitchen. I don't remember what he made, probably an omelet with something else, but it was very good. Dick got up from the table and called me over: "I think he looks pretty good." I replied, "I'm shocked, but I agree."

Here was the key: I could tell more from our conversations with Emeril than from what he cooked. You look in a man's face and you can tell an awful lot. There are a few questions you have to ask anyone you want to hire: What made you want to be a chef? Can you cook in this environment? How do you feel about restaurants and what's going on in the business? How do you feel about cooking in a Creole restaurant all the way down in New Orleans? Emeril's answers were honest. He interacted with us very well, and there was a strong attraction on his part to becoming a chef.

Emeril went back to Massachusetts. We called him a few days later and made him an offer, which he accepted right away. But it took us an eternity to get him to Commander's. If I remember correctly, he and his wife were expecting a baby, they had to sell a house in Massachusetts and buy a house in New Orleans, and it would be a month before he could start.

While we waited, I got a phone call from a guy I knew of but didn't know well, and he said, "I understand you hired that Lagasse guy."

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Well, you know he can't cook."

"What the hell are you talking about he can't cook?"

"No, he's full of personality but he can't cook."

That shook me up, so I got rid of that guy on the phone and went to Dick and told him what I'd heard, and he just said, "Oh, God. What are we going to do? Stop it?"

We decided, OK, you worry today and I'll worry tomorrow, because we've got a business to run in the meantime.

Soon after, Emeril came down and he quickly put our fears to rest. (Many years later I had a rather straightforward chat with the gentleman who had called

and made us so nervous. Clearly he was just trying to hang onto an employee, but when he had the nerve to walk into Commander's one day . . . well, let's just say he had a greater understanding of what I thought of him after our chat.)

Emeril was a fast and eager learner, and it became clear that the kitchen staff would respond to his budding leadership skills. And yet he was very unworldly. He knew what he had learned in school and a little of what he had learned on the job, but he didn't know anything about Creole cooking or New Orleans. We had to get that into his head. We sent him to every restaurant in town, and I sat with him by the hour. I fed him books and newspapers: "Start reading! Start reading! Start reading! Make friends in the industry!" And he was like a sponge.

After he got going, Dick and I were in a position to introduce him to some of the nation's food writers. Food was becoming a big story in newspapers and magazines in a way it hadn't ever been. We wanted the rest of the country to know more about New Orleans, Emeril, the restaurant and what was going on down here. Writers would periodically check in on the telephone or come visit, keeping alive connections that had started with my brother Owen and were carried on by Paul. We suggested to Emeril that he maintain those relationships, so he'd talk to colleagues and writers every Saturday morning to find out what was going on in the food world and then suggest that New Orleans would like to be a part of whatever was happening on the American dining scene. He didn't have to say much. They got the message. And that's how Emeril became well known in this emerging foodie world.

Ti recalls a story from this era that involved Commander's being named to *Playboy* magazine's annual Best Restaurants in America list. Once I got word that we'd been included, I got excited because, as we all know, *Playboy* really did have good writers and good stories amongst the girly photo features. Well, I wanted that list, but I was not about to go into our local K&B drugstore and ask for a bunch of *Playboys*. Wasn't going to do it. I went looking for Alex, but he was nowhere to be found. There were no cell phones in those days, and I am not known for my patience. I finally tracked down Ti (who would have been in her late teens or very early twenties), gave her cash, and explained why she had to go right away and buy me as many *Playboys* as she could. They were still kept behind the counter at that time.

"Mom, *really?*" was her reaction to my directive. She was none too thrilled, but honestly, I figured it would be another one of those crazy things in life that would teach her to get past her fear of what other people think—what I call hang-ups.

She complied, and there we were on the list, with K-Paul's and Lutèce and a bunch of other great places. And Ti apparently recovered from her trauma.

Dick kept the restaurant going while I did what I had to do with Emeril or Paul or, later, Jamie Shannon, be it arranging for them to cook at a charity event or give a cooking demonstration on a TV show. It used to be that chefs weren't really out in front of the public, but we pushed them out there and put them in a position to learn. I had Emeril reading every major newspaper food page in the country, and the business pages, along with *Forbes* and *Fortune*. I felt he had to understand where his customers were coming from and be able to talk about whatever was happening today.

As we know, it worked very well. And could he cook! Emeril furthered the evolution of Haute Creole cuisine and expanded on what Paul had been doing with Cajun, but he also brought his French-Canadian/Portuguese heritage—and his own insatiable curiosity—to bear on the menu.

Emeril was eager to try new things, and so were we. One of my favorite sayings is, "If it ain't broke, fix it anyway." We want to continue to evolve, but we had to be careful because we didn't want our guests to be guinea pigs. Proposed dishes had to be thought out and thought out and thought out, and then tested on my siblings and me, long before they ever came out of the kitchen.

We were happy to have him tweak some of the signature dishes, but we made him prove himself before we were comfortable introducing something as "an Emeril Lagasse dish." But when those dishes worked—wow! That's how we got Veal Chop Tchoupitoulas, stuffed quail, rack of lamb with Creole mustard crust, and on and on. Eventually, he wanted to try adding elements of other cuisines to our Haute Creole base. Many different cultures were represented in New Orleans, he reasoned, so why not reflect some of their flavors on our menu?

I was fine with that and encouraged him, but again, he had to make a convincing argument. I told him that to understand the food, you have to understand the culture. And if you understand the culture, then you will understand the

people. And by understanding them, you will understand the food. We encouraged him to travel and develop contacts, not just with people at the world's top restaurants, but also with the farmers and fishermen and food producers in our backyard of Louisiana. That way, if he came to us with an idea to do something Asian inspired, we could make sure that it was justified and that he had done his homework. "What do you know about Asian ingredients or Greek ingredients (or whatever)?" I'd ask. "Where does this fit in with our history and culture, and where did the dish come from? Why does this dish make sense?" With each series of discussions we'd both learn something, and the menu would slowly evolve in a thoughtful but exciting direction. That's how we became a team.

Of course, one of the most important things about changing a menu is to give the cooks a challenge to do something exciting and different instead of repeating, repeating, repeating. To do that, you have to get a general feeling of what the public wants, what they are looking for, what's becoming popular, what's appropriate for the season. But every now and then you've got to say "Strawberry time!" And you do the strawberry shortcake, which this town is nuts for. And a few weeks later you have a new olive oil, so you take it out in the dining room and show it around. You tell people this is a new one—you can try it on the salad today and see if you like it. Or, you have some fun with the soft-shell crabs. We had a couple that would catch them for us. They'd load them on a Greyhound bus to the New Orleans station, where they would be put in a taxicab and driven to the restaurant. The most fun thing to do was to have a cook get the crabs out of the cab and then go into the dining room and say, "Look! They just came in by taxi!" before giving them to the kitchen. Little things like that immediately made the customer feel really good.

Emeril fit in beautifully. He was one of those guys who understood that running a kitchen or a restaurant was about far more than food. And did he work! He had a good personality and wasn't one of those yelling and screaming chefs. He got along with people, and he immediately let them know he was going to be a good leader and help them. He did have his moments though. On those rare occasions when he would act out, I'd sometimes slip a piece of paper into the pocket of his chef's jacket and tell him to read it at the end of the night. He'd fish it out as he was leaving and would find that I had written something like "Leave

UNLEASHING EMERIL'S POTENTIAL

Emeril's evolution into a full-fledged chef-owner was hastened under Ella's tutelage during his nearly eight years at Commander's Palace. Here, he traces his learning path:

"We were great communicators. Serious communicators. The restaurant was evolving, the customer base was growing and the staff was growing. We truly believed that we had some magic going on. I was very involved in the front of the house as a chef. I was very involved with the customer, but Ella really didn't know that it could also be done from the kitchen. So we learned that together and made that evolve together.

"I would have some of our local customers come into the kitchen and just say, 'We don't really want to see a menu tonight. What are you doing?' So Ella and Dick allowed me to have what we called 'weapons' or 'toys.' I would have soft-shell crabs, but they weren't necessarily on the menu. And I would have a veal roast that wasn't on the menu. It was a very interesting way for me to sort of cook and create and begin to think outside the box with our customers. And then one day she said, 'I just don't understand why you don't take over the whole restaurant.' And I said, 'What do you mean?' And she said, 'Well, now you know as much about service as most people do, and you know more about the customer than most people do, so why don't you just be the general manager?' I said, 'I really want to do that. Can I do that from the kitchen?' So I became her general manager, her right hand with chef's whites on. It was a blast, and we really added some layers of magic again."

your ego at home," and that seemed to solve the problem. Probably ticked him off at the time, but it solved the problem.

I'd also occasionally remind him of our "7 Ps" motto: "Prior proper planning prevents piss-poor performance." I had actually forgotten about that until he brought it up recently, but I'm glad he's carried it with him.